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ABSTRACT

An instructor teaching a 20th-century fiction course was surprised by her students' response to a series of stories she asked them to read about the South. Apparently representing the feelings of many in the class, one student said, "These people are weird. And we don't like them." Though they were used to encountering differences in terms of race, gender and class, the students were unprepared for difference based on place or region. The multicultural favorites--race, class and gender--are a lens for both students and teachers to look through when considering the "other"; it screens out other analytical perspectives. Editors of anthologies choose stories to be representatively "African-American" or "female" or "working class" and present them to their readers neatly wrapped with editorial comments that explain the nature of the differences represented. Students become "accidental tourists"--unwilling travelers who want the different to resemble the familiar; and academics become academic tourists--thinkers who assess difference, and its value, in terms of how they can fit it into a schema, a way of looking at the world that they have designed. What the students were objecting to in the Southern stories by William Faulkner ("A Rose for Emily") and Flannery O'Connor ("A Good Man is Hard to Find") was not that the South was represented but that it was represented in a way that was totally unfamiliar to them--in a way that did not fit into their frame of reference. (TB)

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"These People Are Weird and We Don't Like Them": Reacting to Regional Difference

(Conference Paper Presented at CCCC, March 23, 1995)

Kim Donehower

In the spring of 1992 I taught my first University course, a survey of 20th century fiction, to a group of bright, about-to-graduate seniors who thought one last literature elective would be "fun." Discussions were engaged from the start and became more lively as the quarter progressed. Until...

Everything stopped dead in the eighth week. I had assigned a series of "Southern Stories." For Tuesday's class, they read Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and William Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily." Now, granted, hitting them with a serial killer and necrophilia on the same day may have been a bit much. Conversation was—subdued. I imagined things would improve in the second class, in which we were discussing the much more ordinary "Why I Live at the PO" by Eudora Welty and "Roselilly" by Alice Walker. Class began, as usual, with students in small groups discussing questions I had assigned about the Welty story, a simple account of a southern family who fight with one another a lot. The room seemed much quieter than usual. When I called the class back together to begin the large group discussion, I was met by 35 stony, stubborn faces. No one said a word. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Didn't you read the stories? I can't believe you don't have anything to say—you've been so talkative all quarter..." A student raised her hand. "We read the stories," she said. "It's just that..." She glanced at her group members for affirmation. "These people are weird," she said. "And we don't like them." The other students nodded.

I thought for a long time about what happened in class that day. As a matter of fact, I'm still thinking about it. This was a class on 20th century fiction. Most of the people in the stories we read could be described as "weird." These students had no trouble with the bizarre classroom described in Donald Barthelme's "School." The week before the southern stories, they had dealt with the graphic violence of Gloria Naylor's "Lucielia Louise Turner" just fine. What was going on?

Up until this time, I had tended to think about issues of difference solely in terms of the "race/ class/ gender" triad, or "RCG." But "RCG" couldn't explain what had happened here. The students had encountered in these stories an "other" whose primary difference from them was one of region, of place. And this "other" was perceived, somehow, as a threat. There was something about the "weirdness" of these southern stories, of these "southern others," that made these students' critical faculties shut down. Up until this point, they had happily visited

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fictional worlds representing a variety of cultures and perspectives with open eyes and inquiring minds. But when it came to these stories, they had decided, clearly, not to go there. "These people are weird and we don't like them" just as easily meant: "These people are weird and we won't read them," or "These people are weird and we won't see them."

What are the differences we've decided not to see? RCG considerations are indispensable elements in the structuring of multicultural work. But when we look only through the RCG lens, what do we decide not to see, and how can this affect ourselves and our students? What is the danger we run by operating solely within the construct of RCG?

The students I've described decided, collectively, to ignore these stories, and not a single one wrote about any of them for her or his course paper. They went from being travelers, willing experiencers of difference, to being accidental tourists—unwilling visitors who want the different to resemble the familiar as much as possible. I want to talk today about the factors that influence this dynamic. How can we encourage our students, and ourselves, to truly be travelers, and not accidental tourists? I want to emphasize this metaphor of the traveler because, to me, thinking about difference in terms of the local and familiar versus the foreign and strange has become a useful way to step outside the usual context of "RCG." I cannot help but put a regional spin on my interpretation of difference, because I myself am a southerner living and working in the upper midwest.

Stepping outside of, but not abandoning, the RCG construct offers a number of advantages First, setting aside the lens of RCG helps us to better appreciate the diversity within our classrooms. This has been vital to me at the University of Minnesota. The students in the College of Liberal Arts whom I teach look extremely homogeneous at first glance. Of the 125 students I've taught, only six have been students of color. The vast majority come from middle-class suburbia. Through the lens of RCG, with the exception of the "G," they do not appear very diverse at all. But if I am to help them both appreciate and seek to explore diversity, I must bring diversity home to them. I must offer them ways to experience difference close to home, difference as part of home. And I often must step outside of RCG to do this.

Second, as I've already mentioned, RCG doesn't account for every kind of difference. The University of Minnesota's anti-discrimination policy includes differences of race, class and gender, but it also includes differences of ethnicity, religion, national origin, and sexual preference—to which others could be added.

Third, when RCG becomes the permanent lens for both students and teachers to look through when considering any "other," it screens out other analytical perspectives. Many multicultural readers reinforce this permanent perspective—the differences they depict come

to us already packaged and defined. Stories are chosen to be representatively "African-American" or "female" or "working class," and come neatly wrapped with instructions for use on the box—in the form of editorial comments that explain to us the nature of the differences contained within. This can be useful as a point of entry, perhaps, but such readers are much like the rigid tour guide who never sways from her or his timetable or route, limiting the scope of what the traveler can see. Such guided tours cater to, and are only suitable for, accidental tourists.

The students in my classroom had clearly been on the multi-culti RCG tour before. They could talk about the Alice Walker story—as long as the discussion centered on racial and gender politics. When I asked them to consider what made the story southern, however, they changed the subject. Students have an often uncanny ability to sense what it is we want from them, to understand what is acceptable within the context of a particular classroom. These students knew that in many of the "multicultural" classrooms we've created, it's not okay to dismiss others who differ in terms of race, class, and gender. It can still be okay, however, to refuse to see those who differ in other ways—particularly southerners. "Why would we want to talk about southerners?" my students seemed to ask that day. After all, we all know that southerners practice the worst sorts of race, gender, and class politics themselves—they would collectively receive an "F" in any multicultural classroom. Alice Walker can be black and she can be female and we will include her on the multicultural tour. But if she is southern, she is off limits.

To return to the metaphor of the traveler versus the accidental tourist: In The Accidental Tourist, Anne Tyler describes the occupation of Macon Leary, a travel writer for those who hate to travel:

"...he wrote a series of guidebooks for people forced to travel on business. Ridiculous, when you thought about it: Macon hated travel. He careened through foreign territories on a desperate kind of blitz—squinching his eyes shut and holding his breath, and hanging on for dear life, he sometimes imagined—and then settled back home with a sigh of relief to produce his chunky, passport-sized paperbacks. *Accidental Tourist in France. Accidental Tourist in Germany. In Belgium.* No author's name, just a logo: a winged armchair on the cover.

He covered only the cities in these guides, for people taking business trips flew into cities and out again and didn't see the countryside at all. They didn't see the cities, for that matter. Their concern was how to pretend they had never left home. What hotels in Madrid boasted king-sized Beautyrest mattresses? What restaurants in Tokyo offered Sweet'n'Low? Did Amsterdam have a McDonald's? Did Mexico City have a Taco Bell? Did any place in Rome serve Chef Boyardee ravioli? Other travelers hoped to discover distinctive local wines;

Macon's readers searched for pasteurized and homogenized milk.

We can think of some of our students, at certain times in certain classrooms, as people forced to travel on business — and ourselves as their Macon Leary. Good pedagogy demands that we expose our students to issues of difference in the classroom if we want them to learn and to grow. Travel is broadening, but we do encounter those students who act as though they feel forced to take this trip. In our efforts to be good "tour guides" and not lose our travelers entirely we may, like Macon Leary, try to explain the different in terms of the familiar—to make it seem as much like "home" as possible. We may pull on definitions and understanding of categories of difference that already exist, without questioning how these categories are constructed. This is what Chris will describe in her paper—the academic's tendency to understand in terms of previously constructed categories—categories which are constructed as much or more by lore as by factual experience.

There is nothing unusual in approaching the issue of difference in this way. The geographer John Kirtland Wright observed, "Explorers have seldom gone forth merely to probe about for whatever they may happen to discover. They have gone in quest of definite objectives believed to exist on the basis of such information as could be gathered from the geographical lore of their own and earlier times."

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan further illustrates Wright's point: "Europeans once held tenaciously to the reality of places like the Northwest Passage and a terrestrial paradise.... The questions posed were not, Is there a Northwest Passage? Is Paradise located in Ethiopia? Rather these places were assumed to exist, and the problem was to find them... Repeated failure to locate them did not discourage explorers from making further efforts. Such places had to exist because they were key elements in complex systems of belief. To discard the idea of a terrestrial paradise would have threatened a whole way of looking at the world."

As scholars and academics, we are often like the explorers Wright describes or the "occidental tourists" Tuan depicts. We approach the unexplored, the unexperienced, looking for justification of our own complex systems of belief, for validations of what we have taken our previous experiences to mean. Kathleen is going to talk about how this tendency plays out in a particular kind of writing assignment—the literacy autobiography. Students may be in danger of becoming accidental tourists, but we are in danger of becoming academic tourists—explorers who go in search of the proof of the already-constructed hypothesis, the justification of the carefully-constructed theoretical methodology.

Consider these sentences of Tyler's description of Macon Leary, our academic tourist: *"I am happy to say ,"* Macon types, *"that it's possible now to buy Kentucky Fried Chicken in*

Stockholm. Pita bread ,too, he added as an afterthought. He wasn't sure how it had happened, but lately pita had grown to seem as American as hot dogs." As academics encounter difference, it is extremely tempting to assess that difference, and its value, in terms of how we can fit it into a schema, a way of looking at the world, that we have already designed. Thus we come to value pita as much as hot dogs. Thus we come to value differences which do not force us to revise our worldviews.

The students in my 20th century fiction class could accept the Gloria Naylor story because acceptance of it did not upset their view of themselves as progressive, liberal Minnesotans. In fact, it reinforced it. Acceptance of something southern, however was a threat. For in the worldview many of these students had constructed, the south was the locus of racism and illiteracy—the repository of all that they were not. Acceptance of this kind of difference would upset their worldview.

Similarly, if I were to change my stand on these stories, my worldview would also have to alter. My ultimate response to the student's silence on this day in class was not to ask them to take out a piece of paper and begin writing about these stories, or to dismiss class early. Rather, I took it upon myself to deliver an impromptu lecture on why these stories were important and why, if the students wanted to truly understand the scope of 20th century fiction, they had to read them. Their faces grew increasingly more rigid as I progressed, and they took on that glassy-eyed look and instructor dreads. As determined as the students were to refuse to see the stories, because they posed a threat to their own worldview, I was equally determined to explain to them why, damn it, these were really great stories. The source from which I get much of my view of myself, my literacy, and my authority to stand up in the front of an English classroom and talk about literacy, comes from stories like these and my understanding of them and their value. The students refused to accept these stories, and I was not willing to set them free from the way I had always thought about them. We therefore engaged in a tug-of-war, with the stories as the rope, in which no one won. The students left the classroom that day as accidental tourists, but I left as an academic tourist. No one had learned anything.

The danger of becoming accidental or academic tourists lives in any kind of classroom, but it is particularly present in the writing classroom. Consider the pleasure Macon Leary takes in his task: "As much as he hated the travel, he loved the writing—the virtuous delights of organizing a disorganized country, stripping away the inessential and the second-rate, classifying all that remained in neat, terse, paragraphs. He cribbed from other guidebooks, seizing small kernals of value and discarding the rest. He spent pleasurable hours dithering over questions of punctuation. Righteously, mercilessly, he weeded out the passive voice."

There is something about the very act of writing, specifically of academic writing, that can induce accidental or academic tourism. The kind of writing Tyler describes is all about classifying and organizing the foreign into a system that is familiar. It is a process that assigns value to the foreign based on a local system of value. It is a mechanism for turning the experience of the different into the experience of the familiar. It is a means of maintaining one's original value system and worldview and reinscribing local ways of thinking.

Critic Neil Postman writes that "if we define ideology as a set of assumptions of which we are barely conscious but which nonetheless directs our efforts to give shape and coherence to the world, then our most powerful ideological instrument is the technology of language itself. Language is pure ideology. It instructs us not only in the names of things but, more important, in what things can be named. It divides the world into subjects and objects. It...forms our ideas of how we stand in relation to nature and to each other." Language allows us to frame our differences. It provides us with the mechanisms for creating categories, and naming ourselves by naming those whom we decide are different, are other, are "not us."

In this, I think, lies the ultimate solution for what happened in my class that day. The students had strict ideas of what "southern" meant. It was a difference framed by the kinds of stories they read for the first class that week—the O'Connor and Faulkner pieces. These were the true examples of "southern grotesque," the sorts of things included in most anthologies to represent, via language, the South. The second set of stories, by Welty and Walker, refuted the definition of the South that the first stories had set up. This is why the argumentative family of Welty was "weirder" than Faulkner's Emily, who sleeps with a corpse. The Welty and Walker stories were "weird" because they were not Southern in the prescribed way. They broke the frame. They were not grotesque. They represented a world that was not, perhaps, that much different than the ones these students inhabited. They were "weird" because, ultimately they were not that "weird" at all.

What happens to the tourist or traveler when the distinctions between the familiar and the strange start to blur, when the foreign starts to look like home, when the frames that maintain the distinctions of "self" and "other" begin to break? The definition of home must alter, and this can be uncomfortable. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes this process: "Human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world. A people who believe they are at the center claim, implicitly, the ineluctable worth of their location... Such a conception of place ought to give it supreme value; to abandon it would be hard to imagine. Yet... human beings have strong recuperative powers. Cosmic views can be adjusted to suit new circumstances. With the destruction of one "center of the world," another can be built next to it, or in another location altogether."

I would argue that, if we truly want our students and ourselves to experience difference not as accidental, occidental, or academic tourists—not in same old binary terms of "us" versus "them" of the "familiar" versus the "foreign"— we must work to achieve the kind of process Tuan describes. To do this, we must examine the ways in which we frame the foreign and the familiar, and we must work to break those frames. If we do not, then all our classroom excursions into difference will merely reinscribe the same old distinctions. The foreign will always seem foreign, and we always return home to find that home hasn't changed at all.

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